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The “Hurrian Hymn”: an introduction, for participants of the Social Practice Initiative  
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This information sheet is intended to outline the bare facts of the “Hurrian Hymn,” so that each participant is equipped to make their own independent interpretation. The available interpretations of the hymn, in the form of sheet music or audio files, are of interest. However, they should be considered as provisional, due to the fact that the musical meaning of the notation is unclear. Participants are encouraged to consider the following, and to develop their own interpretations.

What is sometimes called “The Hurrian Hymn” (not the best term, as it is by no means the only hymn in the Hurrian language) is the earliest known example of music notation, dating to around the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC. The hymn is written on a clay tablet (about the size of a smart phone), in cuneiform script. Cuneiform is the earliest known form of writing, which used a stylus (usually of reed) to make fine incisions on wet clay. Cuneiform was a complex writing system, used to write several different languages (as our alphabet is also used to write different languages). This tablet is a good example of this, as it includes the words of the song (lyrics) in the Hurrian language, and the music instructions (or “notation”) in Akkadian. Akkadian is an early Semitic language, belonging to the same family of languages as Arabic and Hebrew. Hurrian, on the other hand, is not related to any contemporary language, and it is poorly understood.

The tablet was found at the site of ancient Ugarit (contemporary Ras Shamra), 1km from the Syrian coast. There are several other examples of tablets with music notation from this site, but one well preserved example (although even this tablet is damaged). The tablet was discovered during French excavations of the 1950s, in the archives of the royal palace, together with many other texts of various types, such as letters and administrative documents. It is now in the National Museum of Damascus, Syria. According to the colophon on the tablet itself, it was written by a scribe whose name was Ammurapi, but it belonged to the collection of someone else (whose name is not preserved). It is unclear whether Ammurapi was merely a scribe, or both a scribe and a musician. It is also unclear if the owner of the collection to which this tablet belongs was a musician.

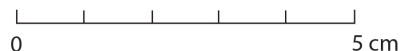
Ugarit was a city known for being a cosmopolitan centre during the late Bronze Age (14<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries). This was due to its being a gateway for trade on the Mediterranean coast, as well as the fact that it was constantly being fought over by the great powers to its east (Mittanni, contemporary northern Syria), south (Egypt) and north (Hatti, contemporary Turkey). The cosmopolitan character of Ugarit in this period, is confirmed by the multilingual nature of texts found there, such as the Hurrian Hymn. The Hurrian hymn uses both the Hurrian language for the lyrics, and the Akkadian language for music

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<sup>1</sup> This information sheet is a guide for the purposes of the Social Practice Initiative. The content is provisional and not for citation.

notation. Hurrian was an official language of the Mittanni Empire, but it was also used throughout Syria and Hatti. Akkadian was the language of Mesopotamia (Iraq), but the use of Akkadian in places outside Mesopotamia is not unusual during this period. Indeed, Akkadian was a language of international diplomacy at this time, reflecting the political and cultural prestige of Mesopotamia.

The upper part of the tablet's obverse includes a hymn written in Hurrian. The text of this hymn is difficult to translate. However, the theme is clearly the promotion of fertility. It is addressed to the moon goddess, Nikkal (called "the wedded one," as she is the wife of the moon god). It refers to the making of offerings and libations (sesame oil) to the deity, and the placing of a ritual object (of lead) at the foot of the divine statue. The lower part of the tablet obverse (below the double line) includes musical instructions, written in Akkadian. The following photographs illustrate the obverse (upper image) and reverse of the tablet (lower image).



The "Hurrian Hymn"

(RS15.30. Photographs by Françoise Ernst-Pradal, French Archaeological Mission to Ras Shamra-Ugarit)

## Lyrics

For a translation, with more information and the text see:

<http://128.97.6.202/urkeshpublic/music.htm#tablet>

## Music Notation

The following interpretation is based on a presumed heptatonic system of modes which is similar to mainstream Western concepts of tuning and modes. One may expect something more exotic, but the evidence points towards this interpretation.

The instructions (or “notation”) do not specify abstract pitches and rhythms. Instead, they are specific to an open-stringed musical instrument, which would have been either a harp or a lyre. The most usual thing for such instruments is to play open strings (which is not the case with a fretted string instrument, like a guitar, for example). The notation consists of dichord names, meaning pairs of open strings, combined with numbers. The dichord names belong to a Mesopotamian system of intervals and modes, which dates to a period considerably earlier (ca. 18<sup>th</sup> c. BC). The other musical texts (from Mesopotamia) use the same dichord names, and at least some of these names refer not only to pairs of open strings, but also to mode names. The modes are defined by certain dichords being “clear,” by which is almost certainly meant, a perfect 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup>.

The Akkadian names given to specific dichords include “fall of the middle,” “closed,” “open” etc. The significance of such names is often difficult to explain. However, some may be explained by their place within a cyclical system of modes; such an example is *išartu* “normal,” which is the starting and final mode of the cycle. A widespread interpretation of these dichord/modes is given below:<sup>2</sup>

<i>išartu</i> "normal"	E F G A B C D
<i>kitmu</i> "closed"	E F# G A B C D
<i>embūbu</i> "reed pipe"	E F# G A B C# D
<i>pītu</i> "open"	E F# G# A B C# D
<i>nīd qabli</i> "fall of the middle"	E F# G# A B C# D#
<i>nīš gabrī</i> "rise of the duplicate" <sup>3</sup>	E F# G # A# B C# D#
<i>qablītu</i> "middle"	E# F# G# A# B C# D#

The choice of the note “E” as starting note in the above table is arbitrary. The system does not specify exact pitches, only relative intervals and modes. In addition, intervals can be read as ascending or descending.

<sup>2</sup> This table, together with the tablature chart of dichords, is from A. D. Kilmer, “Musik. A. Mesopotamien,” in: Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie, Bd. 8, (1993-7), 472-3. Š indicates the sound “sh” as in “ship.” Macrons (e.g. ū) indicate long vowels. Circumflexes over vowels (e.g. û) also indicate long vowels.

<sup>3</sup> Now read (according to evidence published in last decade) as *nīš tuhri* “rise of (part of the) heel”

The following table indicates the main dichord/interval names, together with their complement intervals (a, b, c, d, e, f, g in the table below). These complement intervals are 3rds/6ths, as opposed to the 4ths/5ths which precede and follow them, in this table:

				9 strings:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	1-5	<i>nīš gabrî</i>	“rise of the duplicate”		•				•				
a	7-5	<i>šēru</i>	“(main theme of a) song”						•		•		
2	2-6	<i>išartu</i>	“normal”			•				•			
b	1-6	<i>šalšatu</i>	“third”		•						•		
3	3-7	<i>embūbu</i>	“reed pipe”				•					•	
c	2-7	<i>rebūtu</i>	“fourth”			•						•	
4	4-1	<i>nīd qabli</i>	“fall/place of the middle”		•			•					
d	1-3	<i>isqu</i>	“throw stick/lot”		•		•						
5	5-2	<i>qablītu</i>	“middle”			•			•				
e	2-4	<i>titur qablītu</i>	“bridge of the middle”			•		•					
6	6-3	<i>kitmu</i>	“closed”				•			•			
f	3-5	<i>titur išartu</i>	“bridge of the normal”				•		•				
7	7-4	<i>pītu</i>	“open”					•			•		
g	4-6	<i>serdû</i>	“(name of a) lament”					•		•			

The colophon indicates that the hymn is “in” the mode of *nīd qabli*. Thus, the basic mode is: E F# G# A B C# D#. The seven notes of this mode are open strings. For example, the dichord *qablītu* (5-2) = B, F#, the 5<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> strings. Other dichords can be worked out using the same principle. The notation itself is given below. Many questions remain: is the notation only for an instrumental accompaniment, or is it for singer(s), instrumentalists or both? Do the numbers refer to the dichord names, or perhaps durations/rhythms? If the numbers refer to the dichords, do they specify the number of repetitions, numbers of notes within an interval, or something else? Are the dichords played successively (as a melody), or together (in harmony)? Perhaps the system is a form of instrumental tablature, indicating hand positions/strings to be plucked?

### Hurrian Hymn notation:

*qablītu* 3 *rebūtu* 1 *qablītu* 3 *šēru* 1 *išartu* 10 “not for singing”<sup>4</sup>  
*titur išartu* 2 *serdû* 1 *šēru* 2 *šalšatu* 2 *rebūtu* 2  
*embūbu* 1 *šalšatu* 2 *rebūtu* 1+<sup>7</sup> *nīd qabli* 1 *titur qablītu* 1 *titur išartu* 4  
*serdû* 1 *šēru* 2 *šalšatu* 4 *rebūtu* 1 *nīd qabli* 1 *šēru* 1  
*šalšatu* 4 *šēru* 1 *šalšatu* 2 *šēru* 1 *šalšatu* 2 *rebūtu* 2  
*kitmu* 2 *qablītu* 3 *kitmu* 1 *qablītu* 4 *kitmu* 1 *qablītu* 2

<sup>4</sup> It is unclear what the instruction “not for singing” refers to here—perhaps a pause in singing, an instrumental section, or something else?